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A Guide for Having Brave Conversations About Children's Media with Kids

by Dr. AnneMarie McClain



Whether from books, movies, and shows to online videos and social platforms, kids are getting lots of messages about race from the media they consume. This guide was created to help you have brave conversations with children and youth about representation, identity, and bias. Please see the related EmbraceRace webinar, *Who Gets Drawn? Race, Gender, and AI Bias in Children's Media,* in which Dr. Kareem Edouard and I share more context and tips.

Before getting started...

1. Remember your own power.
2. Remember that kids can handle plenty that is true.
3. Decide if you (the adult) want to pick the media content you will consume together, or if you will let the child(ren) pick.

During/after the shared media content or experience...

1. Meet kids where they are.
2. Ask: Who's there and who's not?
3. Highlight what works.
4. Disrupt what isn't working.
5. Pause on the unsure.
6. Stay open to learning going both ways.
7. Ask: How did we get here?
8. Talk about the creators, executives, and teams behind the content.
9. Remind them that they can talk to you about content.
10. Find great content – and more content similar to what they love.

Before getting started...

1. Remember your own power.

Children and their situations can vary. You know the child(ren) in your life best. When it comes to the media and tech in their lives, knowing what to say, when, and how can be challenging. Kids do have access to a lot of media and tech– but how you guide children around that media and tech also matters. Ask yourself: What would you hope to communicate about content if you thought you could say it perfectly? Now ask yourself: Why do you feel like it has to be perfect? What if you just start? You can always begin by asking the child what they understand. Allow their knowledge and questions to guide you. You can always pause and circle back. Media – even problematic content – can be a scaffold for brave conversations around identity, if we choose to leverage them.

2. Remember that kids can handle plenty that is true.

Key developmental psychology literature underscores how children notice social group differences, whether adults explicitly talk about them or not (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 2006). Importantly, anti-bias education literature (e.g., Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020) suggests that children can handle real information about social identities, biases, and communities that are different from them, even in preschool. Sharing such information with children may help kids feel pride about who they are and reduce prejudices towards those who are different from them. Importantly, many BIPOC families, families of gender expansive children, families within marginalized religious communities, and others already engage in direct conversations about identities, differences, and biases at very young ages. Ask yourself what it would be like if everyone had brave conversations about identities, differences, and biases.

3. Decide if you (the adult) want to pick the media content you will consume together, or if you will let the child(ren) pick.

Either way is okay, but make sure it isn't always the grown-up picking the content.

Repeat as much as you can. Put your own spin on it, and share what you learn with others.



During/after the shared media content or experience...

1. Meet kids where they are.

Ask them what they understand about the content. What do they notice? Is there a lesson or moral? If so, can they tell you what it is? (If they get confused, help them. Young children can be easily confused by even well-intentioned educational content; see Mares & Acosta, 2008). Ask them what, if anything, they like or don't like about this content. Moreover, what do they like or dislike about their favorite content? Tell them that you care what they think.

2. Ask: Who's there and who's not?

Ask the child(ren) what they notice about the characters or people in the content. Does anybody or anything seem familiar to them? The same as them? Different from them? What, if anything, do they notice about social identities? For example, which are the skin colors and genders they see? Which ones don't they see? What, if anything, do they notice about who is included in this media? Who isn't included? Ask them what they think about that, and why. Tell them what you think about that, and why.

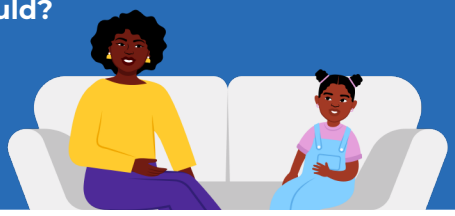
3. Highlight what works.

Ask kids what, if anything, they think is good about the representation. For example, which people with which skin colors get to be the leaders? Which people with which gender identities or expressions get to be the heroes? Talk about works about the representation. Point out when BIPOC folks, LGBTQ+ people, marginalized religious community members, and people with disabilities get to be main characters, have positive attributes, and non stereotypical hobbies and interests. If you have trouble noticing anything "good" about the representation in the content you are consuming together, tell the child(ren) what you think about that.

4. Disrupt what isn't working.

Ask kids what, if anything, needs to be changed about the representation. For example, is anyone being left out? Are certain characters being made to look bad? What would they change if they could? Who would they include? What stories would they tell? Why? Even if a child loves a particular type of content or platform, it can be valuable to share your critiques. Doing so may help kids critically engage with, and question, media representations on their own. It can also help kids understand that content creation is the result of choices that people make (or choices they allow algorithms and machines to make). Kids can learn that different choices can be made, and that they can help inform what choices get made.

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5. Pause on the unsure.

It is okay to pause when you aren't sure how something is landing. You can pause the video or put the game away for now. If you aren't sure what to say, you can pause the conversation. You might say something like: "Let's pause. Something about this doesn't sound right to me," or "Let me think about what I want to tell you about this book." You can find some resources (including other caregivers, educators, and experts) and return when ready. You can model how it is okay to not have all the answers right away.

6. Stay open to learning going both ways.

Socialization – the processes by which we learn the expectations of our environments – is bidirectional (e.g., Kuczynski and Parkin, 2009). Children learn from the adults, and adults learn from children. Socialization that happens around media is no different. Make sure you remain open to what kids think. How do the content and characters make them feel? What questions do they have? Why do they like what they like? Do they think you are missing something? Sometimes the kids really are alright and do know best!

7. Ask: How did we get here?

If the child(ren) chose the content, ask them questions about why they picked it. How did they come across it? Was it recommended by someone? By an algorithm? Did it start on autoplay? Talk about that. Was there anything that made the content seem particularly fun, cool, good, interesting, or necessary to consume? Did they have a reason for wanting to consume this content right now? If you chose the content, explain to the child why you chose to share it with them.

8. Talk about the creators, executives, and teams behind the content.

Once you have consumed the content together, find out who or what created, produced, and/or recommended it. Have a conversation about the choices that go into content creation. What does the child understand about content creation? Do they have any questions about how media get created? Would they like to be involved? What would they like to learn or try? What feels important to mention to them about content creation processes?

9. Remind them that they can talk to you about content.

Remind kids that they can talk to you about their media and platforms. Tell them to use their smart thinking about what they consume, even when you're not in the room. Ask them to let you know when they might like to consume content with you or to use a platform alongside you. Check in regularly. Remind them that you care about what they're learning and noticing from their media.

10. Find great content – and more content similar to what they love.

If you find content (like StuntBoy and MayNERD's Wild World of Science) and/or content creators and producers you love (like Dr. Kareem Edouard and Dr. Darlene Mortel Edouard at Ole Greens Group), find their other content. Subscribe, follow, share, and support their work. Check out banned books lists. On social media, see what trusted influencers are recommending; follow others who follow them. Ask librarians and educators for titles similar to what the kids in your life enjoy. As an adult, consider asking AI platforms for recommendations for age-appropriate content that includes the representation you are looking for (but evaluate it yourself). For ideas around how to talk with kids about social identities and various childhood experiences, check out books from these two series, co-authored by Dr. AnneMarie McClain and Dr. Lacey Hilliard: Topics to Talk About and Loved Ones With. There is good content out there. When you find it, amplify it – and think about putting your own content out there, too!

Repeat as much as you can.

Put your own spin on it, and share what you learn with others. Onward.

EmbraceRace is a multiracial community of parents, teachers, experts, and other caring adults who support each other to meet the challenges that race poses to our children, families, and communities. We welcome your participation.

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